

# Do Hold Your Breath

By Douglas A. Mazdor  
Safety Specialist  
Puget Sound Naval Shipyard

**R**emember when, during rip-out phase aboard a ship or in a barracks, tile setters and laborers whacked and hacked, using pneumatic chipping hammers at the stuff called terrazzo? Did you hold your breath and race through the area, never giving much thought to the dust cloud billowing around you? Or if you had to work or linger in the area, did your nose fill up with the stuff in this dust cloud, and when you blew your nose, you had...well, at this part, use

your own imagination. Of course, those tile setters and laborers wore respirators, but did you when you were in those areas?


Terrazzo is marble chips set in cement and polished. However, some terrazzo is made with sand, small rocks or pretty-colored epoxy. It is used to level floors.

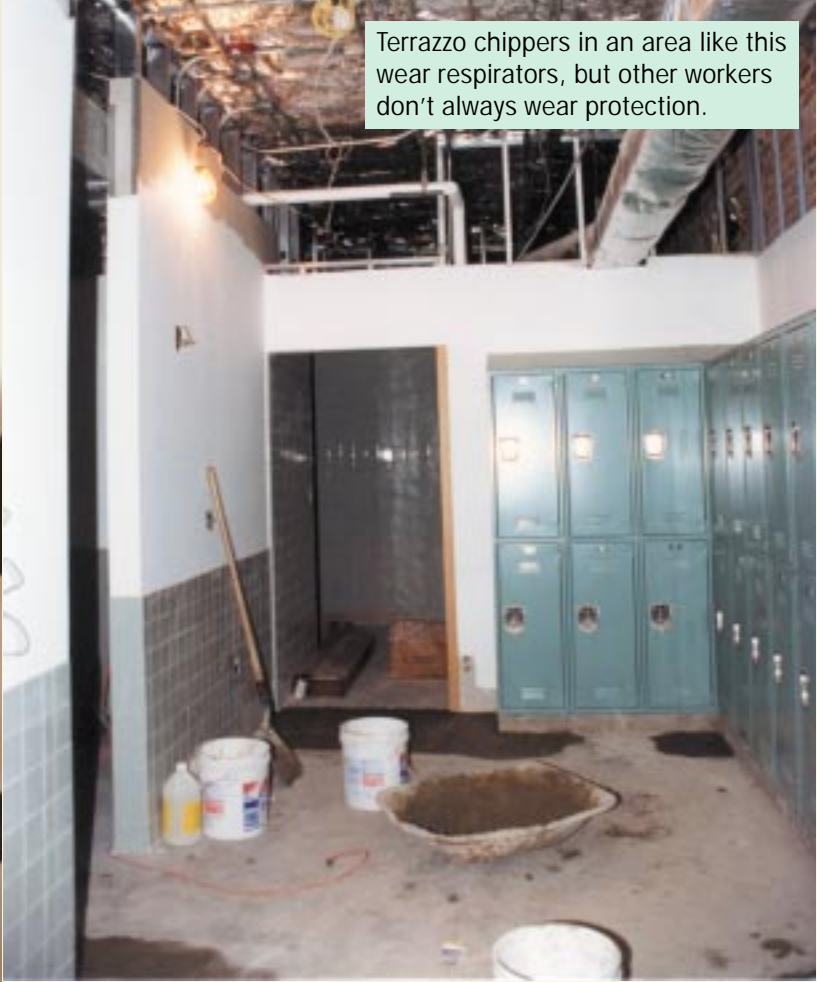
In its hardened form, terrazzo is not a problem. Only when it is sanded or chipped, creating a silica-dust cloud, is danger present. The cloud is made up mostly of tiny particles of sand (silicon dioxide). The big stuff doesn't do much damage; it gets into your nasal passages and upper respiratory system, and you can cough it up. But it's the smaller, almost invisible, particles that cause problems.

They get trapped in the tiny air sacks in your lungs. Your body's defense system reacts by surrounding these foreign particles with fibrils that continue to grow. If you inhale terrazzo dust too long, more and more air sacks become filled with fibrils, and your lung capacity is reduced. This condition is called silicosis.

In the 1930s, at Gauley Bridge, W.Va., about 800 workers drilled, chipped and cut through a granite mountain to build a railroad tunnel. After about five years, 476 workers had died from silicosis. This situation prompted the U.S. Labor Department to enact laws to protect workers from being exposed to silica.

The next time you may be working on a deck with a product, such as terrazzo, that creates a dust cloud, check the Material Safety Data Sheet (MSDS) for the ingredients or call your local industrial hygienist. Even though you're not doing the actual chipping, if you're in the area for any length of time, you need to wear a respirator.

If you just walk through a space that has a dust cloud, speed up and hold your breath. 



Terrazzo chippers in an area like this wear respirators, but other workers don't always wear protection.